

As we connect with a wide variety of organizations across the spectrum of businesses and not-for-profit organizations, we see many approaches to board leadership. Some cautions may be helpful for boards who wish to fulfill their key responsibility of directing the organization.

Don't neglect the job of directing. Some boards spend too much time and effort on financial oversight and monitoring or inappropriately get into operational details. The value in having a board is the collection of market place perspectives and varied skill sets board members bring to positioning the organization for success.

Don't delegate strategic planning to staff. In most organizations, staff are so busy looking after day-to-day issues – the urgent and the important -- the here and now – that it can be difficult for them to step back from operations and consider how the organization would ideally be positioned to prosper five years from now. There is also a risk of bias toward moving the organization in a direction that best suits the staff's preferences or skill sets rather than towards what is best for the owners or members.

Don't forget to gather perspectives from owners. Sometimes board members inaccurately assume that they understand the desires of the majority of the organization's members or owners.

Don't let the senior staff person communicate strategic direction. Once the direction has been set or key strategic decisions have been made, it is the role of the board to let owners know. This message can be disseminated by staff via email or a newsletter, but the message should come from the board. This clarifies to owners that the board is fulfilling its mandate of owner accountability.

What You Can Do

Encourage your board to fulfill its duty of directing the organization by:

1. Setting the direction for the organization for the next few years.
2. Consulting with diverse owners prior to completing the strategic plan so the direction determined can truly reflect the interests of the owners as a whole.
3. Communicating the direction to all owners in a message signed by the board chair.

This article was originally written by Mary Lynn McPherson, February 2007.